

Community Foundation of Herkimer and Oneida Counties  
Central New York Legal HelpLine  
Project Proposal 2004-2005

**A. Mission Statement and Clients Served**

The Legal Aid Society of Mid-New York, Inc. (LASMNY) is a not-for-profit law office. We provide free civil (non-criminal) legal advice and representation to low-income people in Broome, Cayuga, Chenango, Cortland, Delaware, Herkimer, Jefferson, Lewis, Madison, Oneida, Onondaga, Oswego and Otsego Counties.

On average, low-income New Yorkers experience 2.3 serious legal problems each year, often affecting basic needs for food, shelter, medical care, safety and family stability. Besides adding stress to the lives of low-income people, legal problems disrupt work activities and family life, continuing the cycle of poverty. When low-income people in Central New York have civil legal problems and can't afford a lawyer, they turn to us. Our mission is to ensure equal justice for low-income people facing civil legal problems.

Our clients are people from many different backgrounds. They are working people, families and people with disabilities. They are senior citizens, veterans and people who get public benefits. They are U.S. citizens, immigrants and refugees, and temporary workers. We determine eligibility for services based on income and family size, serving people with household incomes up to 125% (and in some cases, up to 187.5%) of the federal poverty guidelines. In some counties, such as Herkimer and Oneida Counties, senior citizens ages 60 or over of all income levels may qualify for services. Our attorneys and paralegals handle a wide variety of civil legal problems, including consumer and debt problems; special education issues; employment issues; discrimination in employment, housing and public accommodations; family matters such as divorce, custody, support and family violence; access to healthcare; housing problems such as evictions, foreclosures and repair issues; public benefits issues and future planning.

The total client-eligible population of our thirteen-county service area is 260,156, of which 20% resides in Herkimer or Oneida Counties. In 2003, we provided services in 2,158 cases within our former nine-county service area affecting 4,696 individuals, including 1,187 cases in Herkimer and Oneida Counties affecting 2,486 individuals.

**B. Need for the Project**

January 1, 2004 marked a major change in the delivery of civil legal services to low-income people in upstate New York. As a result of shifts in federal Legal Services Corporation (LSC) funding, LASMNY's program service area was reconfigured to serve a thirteen-county area in the Central New York region. Unfortunately, the reconfiguration process did not result in an overall increase in funding for the new service area. Furthermore, deep cuts in traditional sources of civil legal services funding (e.g., state civil legal services funding and Interest on Lawyer Accounts funding) due to the state budget crisis and declining interest rates have resulted in staffing reductions statewide.

As an immediate measure to increase capacity to serve clients, LASMNY and sister agency Legal Services of Central New York (LSCNY) (which formerly served Cayuga, Cortland, Jefferson, Onondaga and Oswego Counties), have come together to create the Justice Alliance of Central New York. While LASMNY remains an LSC-funded program serving the basic legal needs of clients, LSCNY has become a non-LSC program focusing on impact work previously unavailable to clients due to LSC funding restrictions. Together, LASMNY and LSCNY more completely serve the legal needs of clients in their joint thirteen-county service area. To further expand capacity in the current challenging funding environment, LASMNY and LSCNY have committed to creating the Central New York Legal HelpLine, a single gateway to both programs for clients throughout the service area.

The Central New York Legal HelpLine, modeled after a highly successful civil legal services program in Toledo, Ohio, is urgently needed to increase capacity to serve clients at current staffing levels. The HelpLine will create a single-point-of-entry intake system for LASMNY/LSCNY's thirteen-county service area, routing incoming callers to a central intake unit of attorneys and paralegals. The skilled intake unit will provide emergency and brief services to callers, referring callers in need of more extended services to the appropriate advocate in the service area simply by dialing a four-digit extension. The Toledo, Ohio model (as well as similar systems implemented by several other legal services programs across the country) has increased emergency and brief services to clients by at least 50% and extended service to clients by at least 25%, while maintaining current staffing levels. *In sum, the HelpLine, when complete, will nearly double services to clients in Central New York.*

### **C. Amount of Support Requested and Intended Use**

The amount of \$52,000, representing 20% of total project costs, is requested from the Herkimer and Oneida County Community Foundation. With the requested support, LASMNY and LSCNY will be in a position to successfully approach other community and private foundations in their joint service area for funding, as well as to maximize donations to the project during a private bar fund drive planned for later this year.

As a whole, the Central New York Legal HelpLine project will create an internal voice and data infrastructure for LASMNY and LSCNY, with its central hub in the Utica office and secondary hubs in the Binghamton and Syracuse offices. LASMNY's outreach offices in Cortland, Oneonta, Oswego and Watertown will connect to the central hub in Utica directly or through the secondary hubs. The new network infrastructure will handle all voice and data traffic between offices and with the community.

### **D. Impact on the Lives of Clients and the Community**

The Central New York Legal HelpLine will result in a substantial increase in the quality and quantity of civil legal services available to clients in our service area, including Herkimer and Oneida Counties. Benefits to clients include:

- ✍ Toll-free or local call access to LASMNY and LSCNY from anywhere in the service area, creating a single gateway by which clients can access the full continuum of services of both programs
- ✍ Distribution of incoming calls evenly among receptionists in the programs' seven offices, maximizing the number of calls answered live and decreasing hold times
- ✍ Providing clients with the option to leave a message or request an automatic callback by the system rather than holding
- ✍ Providing clients with a choice between walk-in and telephone service
- ✍ Creating a skilled central intake unit of attorneys and paralegals who can quickly handle emergency and brief service cases using phone, fax and mail, freeing up 25% more time for other advocates to focus on clients needing extended services
- ✍ Faster access to emergency and brief services needed to preserve important legal rights and prevent more serious legal problems
- ✍ Increasing the ability of elderly and/or disabled clients, clients working during the day, clients in rural areas and clients with transportation problems to access high quality legal services without ever having to visit an office
- ✍ Decreasing numbers of clients lost to services through no-shows for appointments
- ✍ Increasing access to high quality legal services for clients with limited English proficiency, through multilingual greetings and call routing to bilingual staff and/or local interpreting services contracting with LASMNY/LSCNY
- ✍ Easy access advocate-to-advocate for referral and/or consultation, simply by dialing a four-digit extension
- ✍ Central monitoring of calls by the intake unit for systemic problems in the community
- ✍ Central monitoring of incoming call patterns by managing attorneys, allowing adjustment of staffing patterns based on hold times, call volume and call spikes
- ✍ Providing current clients, courts and agencies quick access to advocates, through four-digit extensions and direct lines
- ✍ Building a data network that will allow advocates anywhere in the service area to access client information as soon as it is entered into the system, as well as local resource contact lists for the entire service area
- ✍ Sustain itself, by eliminating charges for phone lines and inter-office calls, reducing toll-free and long distance charges, avoiding regional charges by routing outgoing calls to the office closest to the number dialed, consolidating the current costs for voice and data lines into a single expense, and decreasing the need for inter-office travel

The following are examples of situations in which the HelpLine will greatly improve services to clients:

*A woman in a rural area in Herkimer County, who has no transportation, calls the HelpLine after an incident of domestic violence. Within five minutes she speaks to an intake attorney in Utica, who connects her with the nearest domestic violence shelter using local agency information in the computer database. The intake attorney enters her information into a computer template form for obtaining an order of protection and e-mails it to shelter staff for filing. Within several hours the woman has temporary custody of her children, who are safe with her at the shelter.*

*A Spanish-speaking man in Syracuse calls the HelpLine from a pay phone, after going home on his lunch hour to find that his landlord has illegally changed the locks to his apartment. Within ten minutes, his call is transferred to a Spanish-speaking advocate in Utica, who negotiates with the landlord while he is back at work. When he returns home, the landlord is waiting for him with a new set of keys.*

*A Utica woman with a terminal illness, unable to leave her home, calls the HelpLine for relief from harassing calls and letters she is receiving about her defaulted student loans. An intake attorney in Binghamton downloads forms for obtaining a disability discharge from the Internet and sends them to her by mail for her signature, along with a release form for her doctor. The woman returns the forms to the advocate, who obtains verification of disability from the doctor and gets the loans discharged.*

By increasing the quality and quantity of civil legal services available to low-income people in the service area, the HelpLine will also impact the community as a whole. Communities in the service area will benefit in the form of increased access to supportive programs for working families and people with disabilities, prevention of homelessness and family violence, increased access to educational services for children with disabilities, increased employability and greater family stability.

#### **E. How the Grant will be Publicized**

LASMNY will publicize the services of the Central New York Legal HelpLine by designing and publishing a brochure detailing the services offered by the HelpLine, in plain English and all of the most frequent languages encountered by LASMNY/LSCNY staff. LASMNY will distribute the HelpLine brochure to government and community agencies throughout the thirteen-county service area. LASMNY will also develop a press release announcing startup of the HelpLine for local newspapers throughout the service area, including media publications of traditionally underserved groups, and will advertise the HelpLine toll-free number in local telephone books. Furthermore, LASMNY and LSCNY will develop an annual report, detailing increased quality and quantity of services to clients through implementation of the HelpLine, for distribution to community agencies throughout the thirteen-county service area. Publications will credit all funding sources contributing to establishment of the HelpLine.

#### **ATTACHMENTS**

- R Project Workplan, with Project Service Area/HelpLine Infrastructure Map
- R IRS Letter of Determination of 501(c)(3) Status
- R Project Budget and List of Other Sources Contacted
- R Current Agency-Wide Operating Budget\*
- R Agency-Wide Operating Budget FY 2003
- R Audited Financial Statements and IRS Form 990 (2002)\*
- R Current Listing of Board Members

\*Due to the reconfiguration process, the Legal Services Corporation has granted LASMNY an extension until June 1, 2004 to complete its audit of FY 2003 income and expenses. A monthly and year-to-date income and expenses report is not yet available, due to the temporary increase in workload of internal accounting staff which has resulted from the reconfiguration process. Updated information will be submitted as soon as it becomes available.